

Planning Accessible Meetings and Events



Guidelines to Accommodate All Participants

Developed by the Massachusetts Department of Public Health,
Office on Health and Disability, 2007



THE MASSACHUSETTS DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC HEALTH (MDPH)

is committed to making all meetings and events sponsored or organized by MDPH accessible to everyone. In adherence with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) it is MDPH's policy to hold events (meetings, conferences and professional gatherings) where physical and communication barriers do not exclude people with disabilities from attending and participating.¹
















When planning a meeting or an event, make sure that everyone can find out about, attend and benefit from it. Integrating accessibility into all components of your meeting or event planning will ensure that the event is enriching for everyone.

¹Nondiscrimination on the Basis of State and Local Government Services Regulation, 28 C.F.R. Part 35, § 35.160 (Department of Justice, 2005). Available at **<http://www.ada.gov/reg2.html>**.

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Facility Accessibility



Ensure that people with disabilities can access and navigate the proposed meeting site.

■ For a useful accessibility checklist regarding:

- Meeting and lecture spaces
- Restrooms
- Parking
- Refreshment and common areas, and
- Directions and navigation



Download a PDF or text version of the ADA Checklist for Existing Facilities at:
http://adaptiveenvironments.org/neada/site/pub_307.

■ **Post clear and logical directional signage** in useful locations and at regular intervals.

■ **Instruct staff greeting participants on directions to accessible routes** and on how to give clear verbal directions to those with visual or cognitive impairments. (See Disability Etiquette links in Resources, page 16).

What to Do in Case of Emergency



Emergency plans must take everyone's access needs into account.

■ **Be sure that emergency announcements and alerts are accessible to all.** Fire alarms should have audible signals and strobes. Announcements should be available through public address systems and visual means.

■ **Have evacuation plans and equipment (if necessary) in place** for people with mobility impairments, service animals, and vision or hearing losses. Be sure that attendees with cognitive impairments understand how to evacuate the building, or designate someone to provide assistance. Point out evacuation routes at the beginning of the event during the basic "housekeeping" announcements.

■ **Develop an accessible evacuation plan** with the local fire marshal who should be able to evacuate people with disabilities quickly and safely. Include people with disabilities in the development process. The local Center for Independent Living may have helpful input. For a list of Centers for Independent Living, visit <http://www.masilc.org/docs/addresses.html>.

Transportation



Make sure everyone can get to where they need to go.

- **Check that your event site is served by useful, accessible public transportation.**
Some public transit only runs at certain hours or intervals, or lacks reliable wheelchair lifts. Familiarize yourself with the routes and schedules serving your event site, and include public transit directions in any directions you give to attendees and presenters.
- **Ensure that there is wheelchair-accessible transportation to and from the airport.** If people are flying into town for your event, they will need to travel between the airport and the event site. Learn about any accessible airport shuttles in your area, and have those numbers available for any attendees who might need them.
- **Parking should be as close to the event site as possible; the site should have sufficient accessible parking.**
 - If your event is intended to appeal to people with disabilities in particular, try to set up extra accessible spaces and drop-off areas ahead of time.
 - For more information on accessible parking specifications, see the Department of Justice's ADA Business Brief on Restriping Parking Lots at <http://www.ada.gov/restribr.htm>. If parking includes parking machines, make sure verbal instructions are also visually represented by icons or text.
- **Use vehicles with wheelchair lifts,** wheelchair tie-downs, and space for securing mobility devices when providing transportation for attendees. Drop passengers off as close to the accessible entrance as possible. Remember that wheelchairs and scooters require extra space, so have enough accessible vehicles available.
- **Call ahead to request accessible taxis,** as the number of accessible cabs in an area tends to be limited. Find out how many accessible vehicles each taxi company in your area has and is running at any given time. Keep the phone numbers of the companies with the most accessible vehicles handy. Tell the companies ahead of time that you may need their accessible taxis at a particular time and place.



Lodging



Be sure that appropriate lodging is available for everyone.

■ **Make sure that the facility is laid out logically and is easy to navigate.**

- For facilities built on or before January 26, 1992, use the ADA Checklist for Existing Facilities at http://adaptiveenvironments.org/neada/site/pub_307/.
- For facilities built after January 26, 1992, use the ADA Checklist for New Lodging Facilities at <http://www.ada.gov/lodgesur.htm>.
- Make sure that signage on the premises is clear, legible, and useful. Guests with low vision or cognitive impairments should be able to find their way easily and safely to and from their rooms and common areas.
- Hotel staff should give clear directions avoiding vague phrases like, “over there”. When giving directions to people who are deaf or hard of hearing, staff should emphasize pointing, miming, and use pre-printed scripts with facility maps.

■ **Provide convenient, quick, and accessible transportation** between the hotel and the event site or ensure that such transportation is easy to find. People with disabilities may have difficulty getting from place to place, particularly if the most convenient transportation methods are inaccessible or expensive. (See Transportation, page 3.)

■ **Inform hotel staff that guests with disabilities may have service animals** with them. Talk to them about service animal laws and etiquette. The Department of Justice’s ADA Business Brief on Service Animals at <http://www.ada.gov/svcanimb.htm> may be a helpful resource.

■ **Make sure that hotel staff know where text telephones (TTYs)** are and how to use them. Have TTYs available at front desks, guest rooms, and public phones.

- Lodging with five or more rooms must have a certain number of visual doorbells, visual alarms, visual/tactile alarm clocks and closed captioned televisions. Check that these devices are in good working order. Staff should know where devices are and how to install them. Leaving guests to install devices is not sufficient.
- Hotel staff should be ready to read aloud any written materials when guests check in or out and must accept identification other than a driver’s license from a person with a disability. See resources by the Department of Justice: “ADA Business Brief on Communicating with Guests who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing in Hotels, Motels and Other Places of Transient Lodging” at <http://www.ada.gov/hotelcombr.htm> and “Guide for Places of Lodging: Servicing Guests Who are Blind or Have Low Vision” at <http://www.ada.gov/lodblind.htm>.

Logistics and Timing



Arrange the logistics of your event conveniently and efficiently for everyone. All-day or multi-day events can pose particular challenges for people with disabilities.

- **Begin the event late enough** so that people who receive help from personal care attendants early in the morning can arrive on time. Note that some people with disabilities have sleep or stamina issues that make very early or very late events impossible for them.
- **Schedule breaks during long workshops** so that people can use the rest room, walk around, take medications, or engage in other self-care activities. Breaks between workshops or activities should be at least fifteen minutes long in order to allow someone who may move slowly to use the rest room or get a drink of water. Also, reading rapidly scrolling CART transcripts or following an ASL interpreter, can be very tiring.
- **Arrange for workshops and activities to be in the same general area** of the building whenever possible. This makes navigation easier and allows people to travel between activities quickly, easily, and punctually; it also helps those with mobility or stamina issues. Accessible restrooms should also be located nearby.
- **Ensure that “field trips” and off-site events are physically accessible** to all participants and include accessible communication. Visit remote sites ahead of time to be sure that all attendees can access them. Utilize the ADA Checklist for Existing Facilities at http://adaptiveenvironments.org/neada/site/pub_307.
- **Be sure that any transportation you provide between one location and another is accessible.** If participants must find their own transportation, check to see if convenient and accessible transportation to the sites exists. (See Transportation, page 3.) If not, consider changing the location of one or both sites.



Promotion and Registration



Use multiple media to promote your event. Set up the registration process so people with disabilities can register easily and let you know what accommodations will be necessary.

■ Ensure that people with disabilities know about your event.

- Advertise your event with disability-related organizations (such as the local Center for Independent Living), e-mail lists, websites, media, etc.
- Be sure that your promotional materials are available at locations and in formats that are accessible to people with disabilities. For example, a flyer on a bulletin board will not reach people who are blind or have low vision. Advertising over the radio will not reach people who are deaf or hard of hearing.

■ Make the registration process accessible.

- Online registration forms should be accessible and usable by people utilizing assistive technology (See Websites and IT, page 10).
- All MDPH event announcements and promotional materials must contain the MDPH Accessibility Policy Statement and Graphics available at <http://www.mass.gov/> - search for "publicity and accommodations".
- Prepare telephone staff for TTY and relay calls (See Staffing and Training, page 11).
- On-site registration tables should include someone who can provide assistance, and feature American Sign Language (ASL) interpreters on standby to assist with the check-in process.

■ Ask about the following accommodation needs on your registration form:

- Sign language interpreters, open captioning, assistive listening devices, Communication Access Real-time Translation (CART)
- Note takers
- Braille, large print, audio cassette, disk (include format)
- Wheelchair access
- Lodging, if applicable
- Transportation
- Any assistants accompanying the attendee
- Environmental concerns: food, allergens, etc. (See Food, Water, and Air, page 11.)



Communication Formats for People with Visual and/or Learning Disabilities



Make sure that everyone can access the information available at your event. Written materials are often inaccessible to people with visual impairments or print disabilities.

- **Make conference and presentation materials available electronically and in large print;** they should also be obtainable in Braille and on audio tape when necessary. If materials include videos or DVDs, these should include captioning and audio description.

- **Be aware that accessible formats include:**

- Braille
- Large print
- Disk (floppy or CD-ROM)
- E-mail
- Closed captioning



- **Make electronic versions of materials available in plain text** (.txt) at the very least; they should also be obtainable in Rich Text (.rtf) or MS Word (.doc). PDF is rarely an accessible format.

- **See Accessible Print Materials: Formatting Guidelines to Accommodate All Audiences** at <http://www.mass.gov/> - search for "Health and Disability".



Communication Access for People who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing



Plan ahead, as people who are deaf or hard of hearing may have a variety of communication access needs. Proper planning will ensure that everyone can communicate and participate comfortably.

■ **Set up an early deadline for attendees to request sign language interpreters or CART.** Then, reserve some interpreters and CART providers well in advance of the event date. If they are not needed by the deadline, you can release them without payment penalties.

- Allow for interpreters and CART reporters when planning room occupancy, meals, and other issues involving exact numbers of people.
- Make sure there are enough interpreters and reporters to serve everyone's needs.
- To reserve interpreters or CART reporters, call the MA Commission for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing. Voice: (800) 882-1155 or TTY: (800) 530-7570

■ **Find out the attendee's preferred mode of communication:**

- American Sign Language (ASL)
- Pidgin Signed English (PSE), which uses ASL signs in an English syntax
- Certified Deaf Interpreter
- Cued speech (modified lip-reading with finger-spelled cues)
- Oral transliteration (facilitated speech-reading)
- CART (Communication Access Real-time Translation)



Not all people who are deaf or hard of hearing sign; likewise, not all people who are deaf or hard of hearing read written transcripts with ease.

■ **Be prepared to address the issue of payment** and answer questions about the nature of the event when you arrange for the interpreter or CART provider. For example, an event geared towards doctors may involve a great deal of medical terminology; you may need an interpreter or CART provider who specializes in medical interpretation.

- Generally, an interpreter signs for half an hour at a time and then switches off with another interpreter. If your event is longer than half an hour, you may need two or more interpreters, even if only one person requires an interpreter. A two-hour minimum charge is the industry standard.

- If you will have people who are deaf both as speakers and audience members, you may need more than two interpreters.

■ **Make assistive listening devices available for people who are hard of hearing.**

- Check before the event to ensure the devices are working and communicate on the same frequency; change and test the batteries.
- Make registration staff aware of the location and availability of the devices.
- Post a sign at the registration table letting participants know what types of devices are available. Remember that a given type of device may not work for everyone and be sure to provide a variety of listening attachments such as headphones, neckloops, silhouette adapters, and earbuds to ensure efficient use.

■ **Ask the interpreters or transliterators what their needs are** in terms of lighting, seating, audio equipment, scheduling, and information.

■ **Issue CART providers transcripts of prepared training materials** so they can incorporate complex terminology into their dictionaries ahead of time.

■ **Tell event staff not to walk or stand in front of interpreters** or block the CART provider's screen.

■ **Avoid lights that point directly into people's faces** or with high levels of glare. Provide sufficient illumination in common areas where people will be gathering and talking so that people who are signing can see each other clearly. Make sure that interpreters are illuminated properly, especially during presentations using projectors where the room may be dark. Signage should be placed in well-lit locations.

■ **Provide a text telephone (TTY) and make it available** if on-site public telephones do not already have them. Instruct registration staff as to its location and use. Post signage at the registration table and public telephones alerting attendees to its availability.

■ **Be sure that any staff who will be in telephone contact with presenters** or attendees are knowledgeable about the proper use of a TTY. The Massachusetts Commission for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing has a helpful information page on TTY use at <http://www.mass.gov/> - search for "Commission on Deaf and Hard of Hearing". Staff should also know how to conduct a telephone relay call. (Most relay operators will offer to explain the system at the beginning of a relay call). Relay service can be reached from anywhere in the U.S. by dialing 711.

What to Have on Hand



Keep a few simple items available to help make the event go more smoothly for everyone, regardless of disability status.

■ **Have the following items for facilitating access available** – note that none of these are substitutes for full physical or communication access!

- Paper and pens, for communicating with people who are deaf or hard of hearing, or have speech impairments
- Extra microphones, for lectures and meetings at which people who are hard of hearing are present
- Magnifiers, for people with low vision
- Lapel or adjustable-height microphones to accommodate people using wheelchairs

Websites and IT



Make it easier for people with disabilities to access websites and electronic information related to your event.

■ **Be sure that people can read your e-mail messages** about your event no matter what kind of assistive technology they are using to access them. Avoid e-mail messages with excessive graphics or complex layouts and fonts. Focus on simplicity and legibility. When possible, restrict your message formatting to text-only.

■ **Make your event website, electronic flyers and promotional e-mail messages usable by people with disabilities.**

- Label separate images and graphics; be sure to use meaningful text in your labels.
- Make sure that all parts of the site can be accessed by keyboard alone, as many people with disabilities can not operate a mouse.
- For more information on web accessibility and how to design web pages so that they can be used by everyone, see Resources, page 16. Any website posted by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts must follow web accessibility standards listed at <http://www.mass.gov/> - search for “web accessibility standards”.

■ **Make all electronic files usable by assistive technology.** Regardless of what other formats you use, always make files available in plain text (*.txt), accessible HTML, and if possible, Rich Text Format (*.rtf).

Food, Water, and Air



Do not overlook environmental factors, which are important for an accessible event.

- **Provide a variety of refreshments, if applicable.** Take into account food allergies such as: peanuts, tree nuts, dairy, wheat, gluten, and sugar. List food ingredients and note requests for accommodations to such sensitivities (See Promotion and Registration, page 6).
- **Include a statement in your promotional literature discouraging attendees and presenters from wearing colognes, scents, or perfumed products** when attending the event. Some attendees or presenters may have Multiple Chemical Sensitivities (MCS), and may become ill if certain common chemicals or perfumes are present.
- **Make sure bottled water and/or accessible water fountains are available**, and provide paper cups and straws next to each for people with mobility impairments. Keep supplies replenished; tell staff working at information or registration tables where water and supplies are located.
- **Avoid the use of flash photography**, which can negatively impact people with seizure disorders or visual impairments.

Staffing and Training



Train event staff to be mindful of access issues.

- **Train all event staff in basic disability etiquette.** Disability etiquette centers around respect, and encompasses issues such as direct communication and personal space (See Resources, page 16). Staff should also have strong communication skills, and should be fluent in and comfortable with the language in which the event is taking place. At a minimum, staff should be trained to understand some ASL signs such as “restroom”, “parking”, “restaurant”, “exit” and “emergency/help”.
- **Make staff available to serve as sighted guides** for people with visual impairments or to provide other types of assistance to people with disabilities. Staff should not force help on anyone who does not want or request it; staff should be polite and willing to take directions. Sighted guides should offer their left arms to be grasped.

Coordinating with Presenters



Make presenters aware of these simple guidelines for making accessible presentations. Presenters may be well-versed in issues of accessibility or they may have never considered such issues before.

- **Provide any written materials in large print and electronic formats** at the time of the presentation. This may be the responsibility of the presenter or the event organizer, so clarify duties ahead of time.
- **Speak clearly and slowly, facing the audience whenever possible**, and do not block any interpreters working in the room. Explain communication protocol before the beginning of each presentation, focusing on:
 - the need to wait to be called upon
 - the lag time between a person's speech and interpreters' and CART providers' translation of what the person is saying, and
 - the need to avoid interruptions and simultaneous speaking.
- **Always speak into any microphone provided**, as audience members who are hard of hearing often rely on such amplification.
 - If an audience member asks a question and is not speaking into the microphone, repeat that question into the microphone.
 - If an audience member is signing and there are several people in the audience who are deaf, either ask the interpreter to repeat what the person signed or ask the person to come to the front of the room to face the audience.
 - Be aware of the proper use of any assistive listening devices that require you to utilize a headset or microphone.
- **Allow a light to be focused on the interpreter when lowering light levels.**
- **Verbalize all visual aids and presentation elements** for the benefit of those unable to see them. If the presentation contains video, it must be closed captioned. If closed captioning is impossible, provide a script. CART providers and interpreters will have difficulty interpreting a video due to room setup and the need for the person who is deaf to be able to see both the provider/interpreter and the video at the same time.
- **Do not comment on the presence of or single out audience members** with disabilities solely because of those disabilities.

Service Animals



People with a variety of disabilities utilize service animals. Be prepared to handle their particular needs and access issues.

- **Ensure that service animals are welcome in the facility.** Remind staff that they may not ask for proof of service animal certification.
- **Make registration and facility staff aware of the different types of service animals,** including guide animals, hearing animals, seizure alert animals, and mobility/balance animals. Not all service animals are dogs.
- **Instruct staff on proper service animal etiquette;** remind them not to distract or disturb any service animals they may encounter during the event.
- **Designate a relief area outdoors** near the accessible entrance, and ensure that sufficient trash receptacles are nearby. Some service animals relieve on grass, and others on concrete or other hard surfaces; try to provide both in the relief area.
- **Accommodate both service animal handlers and people with allergies.** If an attendee or staff member is allergic to someone's service animal, offer to seat the allergic person far away from the service animal and out of the way of any ventilation that might expose them to dander or fur.
- **Ask about seating preferences.** People with service animals may sit wherever people without service animals are allowed to sit, but may prefer seats with the most space for their service animals, or away from the path of traffic.



Resources for More Information



Utilize these agencies, websites and telephone numbers to learn more about planning accessible events.

■ The Disability Handbook for Executive Branch Entities

Created by the Massachusetts Office on Disability (MOD), this contains a variety of state accessibility policies and tips for carrying them out. All policies and practices in the Handbook have been approved by Governor Patrick. To access the Handbook, visit **<http://mass.gov/mod/ExecutiveBranchDisabilityHandbookfinal2007.doc>**, or call MOD at (800) 322-2020 (V/TTY) for a hard copy.

■ Centers for Independent Living

These advocacy and resource centers are run by, for, and about people with disabilities.

- ILRU Directory of Centers for Independent Living – **<http://www.masilc.org/docs/addresses.html>**

■ Accessible events

- MDPH's accessibility policy statement and graphics – **<http://www.mass.gov/>** - search for "publicity and accommodations"
- How to Plan Events that Everybody Can Attend (New York State Department of Health) - **<http://www.health.state.ny.us/nysdoh/promo/events.htm>**
- Section508.gov, a web site explaining the law regarding accessibility of federal information technology. Includes a free tutorial on planning accessible events – **<http://www.section508.gov/>**

■ Facility access

- ADA Checklist for Existing Facilities – **http://adaptiveenvironments.org/neada/site/pub_307/**
- Massachusetts Architectural Access Board – **<http://www.mass.gov/aab/>**
- ADA Checklist for New Lodging Facilities - **<http://www.ada.gov/lodgesur.htm>**
- Accessible Parking Lots – **<http://www.ada.gov/restribr.htm>**
- Department of Justice ADA Information – **<http://www.ada.gov/>** or (800) 514-0301
- DBTAC: New England ADA Center – **<http://www.newenglanddbtac.org/>** or (800) 949-4232

■ Emergency planning

- FEMA's page on Emergency Planning for Individuals with Special Needs - **<http://www.fema.gov/plan/prepare/specialplans.shtm>**
- DisabilityInfo.gov's resource page on disaster planning and people with disabilities (many links) - **<http://www.disabilityinfo.gov/digov-public/public/DisplayPage.do?parentFolderId=213>**
- An ADA Guide for Local Governments: Making Community Emergency Preparedness and Response Programs Accessible to People with Disabilities - **<http://www.ada.gov/emergencyprep.htm>**
- National Fire Protection Association's Emergency Evacuation Planning Guide for People with Disabilities - **<http://www.nfpa.org/categoryList.asp?categoryID=824>**
- Disability Policy Consortium's page on Emergency Planning - **<http://www.dpcma.org/EmergencyPreparedness/tabid/468/Default.aspx>**

■ Effective communication and alternate formats

- To reserve interpreters and CART reporters in Massachusetts – **<http://www.mass.gov/mcdhh/>** or (800) 882-1155 (v) / (800) 530-7570 (TTY)
- To order Braille transcription of an MDPH publication – Massachusetts Commission for the Blind Office of Information Services, or (617) 626-7491. Please allow at least two weeks' notice, and submit materials in Word, WordPerfect, or plain text/ASCII
- Accessible Print Materials: Formatting Guidelines to Accommodate All Audiences – **<http://www.mass.gov/>** - search for "accessible print materials"
- Communicating with Guests who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing in Hotels, Motels and Other Places of Transient Lodging - **<http://www.ada.gov/hotelcombr.htm>**
- Guide for Places of Lodging: Serving Guests who are Blind or who have Low Vision - **<http://www.ada.gov/lodblind.htm>**
- Using a TTY – **<http://www.mass.gov/>** - search for "Commission on Deaf and Hard of Hearing"
- Removing Barriers: Tips and Strategies to Promote Accessible Communication - **<http://www.fpg.unc.edu/~ncodh/htmls/rbtipsandstrategies.htm>**

■ Accessible web design/information technology

- Commonwealth of Massachusetts Enterprise Web Accessibility Standards, Version 2.0 – <http://www.mass.gov/> - search for “web accessibility standards”
- World Wide Web Consortium’s (W3C) Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI) – <http://www.w3.org/wai/>
- Web Accessibility In Mind (WebAIM) – <http://www.webaim.org/>
- Guide to the Section 508 Standards: Web-Based Intranet and Internet Information and Applications - <http://www.access-board.gov/sec508/guide/1194.22.htm>
- Section508.gov, a web site explaining the law regarding accessibility of federal information technology. Includes a free tutorial on accessible web design – <http://www.section508.gov/>

■ Service animals

- ADA Business Brief on Service Animals – <http://www.ada.gov/svcanimb.htm>
- Delta Society – <http://www.deltasociety.org/>
- Guide Dog Users, Inc. – <http://www.gdui.org/>

■ Disability etiquette

- Easter Seals’ Disability Etiquette Page - http://www.easterseals.com/site/PageServer?pagename=ntl_etiquette
- Disability Etiquette Handbook (City of San Antonio, TX Planning Department) - http://www.sanantonio.gov/planning/disability_handbook/disability_handbook.asp?res=800&ver=true

For More Information and Other Publications

For other MDPH Office on Health and Disability publications, go to <http://www.mass.gov/> – search for “Health and Disability”

- Accessible Print Materials
- Plan for Promoting the Health of People with Disabilities

Please contact:

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Phone: 617-624-5070

TTY: 617-624-5992

<http://www.mass.gov/dph/>

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